



NEGP MONTHLY

A monthly indepth look at states and communities and their efforts to reach the National Education Goals
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State Highlighted

Connecticut

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SHINING STAR

Connecticut is a shining example of what can be done to improve the reading performance of all students. Although Goal 3 of the National Education Goals Panel does not specifically mention reading, the acquisition of reading skills is essential for student achievement in all subject matter.

This Monthly provides a summary of the Goals Panel's latest addition to its series *Lessons from the States*. In the report, *Exploring High and Improving Reading Achievement in Connecticut*, Joan Boykoff Baron examines the data and depicts how well Connecticut students do in reading. She also highlights state and local policies and practices that may have led to the state's success.

Overview

Reading by nine is a rallying cry heard in classrooms, school district offices and governors' mansions across the country. Educators are shaping strategies to improve student reading and comprehension into district- or schoolwide reading programs. Lawmakers are debating and passing legislation designed to improve student reading achievement and different local, state and national organizations are creating public awareness campaigns, such as the National Education Association's *Read Across America* and the Baltimore SUN's series *Reading by Nine*.

An example of the nation's determination to improve student reading achievement is the Reading Excellence Program, a \$260 million federal grant program to states. The program is designed to:

provide children with the readiness skills they need in order to learn how to read once they begin school;

to teach every child to read by the end of third grade; and



to use research-based methods to improve the instructional practices of teachers.

Last August, the U.S. Department of Education announced grants to 17 states under the Reading Excellence programs. States receiving grants are: Alabama, Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Vermont and West Virginia. The grants focus on professional development, tutoring, family literacy and transition programs for kindergarten students.

Some state and school district leaders point to a 1998 landmark report as a catalyst for their efforts to improve student reading achievement. This report addresses a longstanding dispute in the field – phonics versus whole language. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, a report of the National Research Council's Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, stresses a "balanced" approach to reading: one that combines phonological awareness and phonics with a literature-based curriculum. Catherine Snow, Harvard professor and chair of the National Research Council's Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, said that "good reading instruction is the most powerful single tool in the prevention of reading difficulties."

Snow's colleague, Susan Burns, study director for the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children at the National Research Council, highlights the need for appropriate professional development opportunities for teachers of reading. According to Burns, "to provide good basic reading instruction for ALL children, teachers need to be furnished with the knowledge, coursework and supervised experiences that will enable them to provide the first four opportunities," which she describes as:

- Opportunities to explore the various uses and functions of written language and to develop appreciation and command of them.
- Opportunities to grasp and master the use of the alphabetic principle for reading and writing.
- Opportunities to develop and enhance language and meta-cognitive skills to meet the demands of understanding printed texts.
- Opportunities to experience contexts that promote enthusiasm and success in learning to read and write, as well as learning by reading and writing.

One state, Connecticut, is a harbinger for strong reading programs. It is the nation's top performer at the 4th- and 8th-grade levels NAEP reading assessments and the state that made the most progress from 1992 to 1998. Connecticut's state and local policies illustrate solid reading instruction with ample opportunities for teachers to receive quality professional development opportunities in the area of reading. This Monthly will discuss a new Goals Panel case study on Connecticut's successful reading initiatives.

The Goals Panel uses data on results to identify top performing and top-improving states and then investigates how statewide progress was made. The Goals Panel specifically looks for "lessons" of public policy that are applicable to other states. As part of its series *Lessons from the States*, the National Education Goals Panel commissioned Joan Boykoff Baron to examine what



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state and local policies may have led to Connecticut's outstanding performance in student reading achievement. Baron's report, *Exploring High and Improving Reading Achievement in Connecticut*, was released last month and her findings are featured in this Monthly.

In her case study, Baron addresses six research questions:

- How consistent is the pattern of results on Connecticut's own statewide tests with those on NAEP?
- To what extent did different economic, educational and racial/ethnic subgroups in Connecticut make progress during the period of growth on NAEP and did the gaps between these subgroups change?
- To what extent can Connecticut's high and improved reading scores be explained by its educational policies rather than its wealth, race/ethnicity and parental education?
- What state-level policies and practices are likely to have contributed to the improved reading scores in those districts with the greatest gains?
- How is reading being taught in classrooms in the districts which made the greatest progress?

Two startling findings emerged from the Baron report:

- Reading achievement in Connecticut has improved for everyone: reading scores have improved for white, black and Hispanic students.
- The state's high socio-economic level does not explain its improvement; state and local policies do.

"One of the reasons we decided to do a case study on Connecticut is that the 10 districts with the greatest improvement in reading scores represent a wide socioeconomic range, a broad geographic distribution and socio-economic and demographic stability," said Governor Paul Patton, 1999 Chair of the National Education Goals Panel. "The success of these districts, collectively, proves that improvement in reading achievement is possible in virtually every state and in every socio-economic group."

Baron's study first reports on the data on Connecticut's student



reading achievement then describes state education policies and practices and local district policies and practices. She offers a series of “next steps.” Attached to the report are comments made by G. Reid Lyon, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health; David Grissmer, RAND; and Andrew Hartman and Sandra Baxter, The National Institute for Literacy.

These and other findings are summarized in this Monthly. Baron’s full report can be found at www.negp.gov. She can be contacted at joanbaron@aol.com.

The Numbers Speak for Themselves

Baron cites data collected by NAEP assessments of reading in 1992, 1994 and 1998 and other Goals Panel indicators. She also examines student achievement on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) reading test administered in grades 4, 6, and 8. Connecticut sails to the head of the class in all possible indicators of student reading achievement.

For example, in 1992, 1994 and 1998, state-by-state reading data were collected for grade 4 students, with grade 8 added in 1998. In 1998, Connecticut not only scored higher than students did nationally, but “the slope of its increase was steeper than that of U.S. students,” writes Baron. Between 1992 and 1998, Connecticut’s 4th-grade students gained an average of 10 scale score points on a scale of 500, while their national counterparts stayed the same. And, Connecticut’s eighth-grade students achieved the second highest average score, one point below that of Maine and 11 points higher than the national average.

Baron points out a similar pattern for the percentages of students at or above proficiency on the NAEP exams. Connecticut again outperforms the nation and all other states. The state also shows significant improvement in the percentages from 1992 to 1998: the percentages of grade 4 students in Connecticut at or above proficiency dramatically increased from 34% to 46% between 1992 and 1998, while the percentages of those in the nation rose from 27% to 29% during the same period.

Results on Connecticut’s own statewide test, the CMT, mirror the NAEP data. The average scale scores of students at both grades 4 and 8, the two levels assessed by NAEP, have increased over time. Similar to NAEP’s “proficiency” level, Connecticut developed a standard of excellence called the Goal Level. Again, similar to NAEP, there was a significant increase in the percentage of 4th- and 8th-grade students who met the goal between 1993 and 1998.

Baron underscores the fact that Connecticut’s growth occurred “during a period for which the average fourth-grade reading scores in the nation were relatively stable.”

Why Money Isn’t Everything

Skeptics may quickly attack Connecticut’s success as merely an indicator of the state’s high family income level. Research also points to a strong statistical relationship between family income and parents’ education levels with student achievement. Yet the state’s *improvement* in reading as opposed to its absolute level of performance cannot be explained by the high income and educa-



The National Education Goals



Ready to Learn



School Completion



Student Achievement and Citizenship



Teacher Education and Professional Development



Mathematics and Science



Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning



Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools



Parental Participation

tion levels of its parents, reports Baron.

Connecticut's high family income level and parent education "can explain only the first set of findings – Connecticut's high achievement," according to Baron. However, it is more difficult to link Connecticut's *improvement* during the mid-1990s to the wealth of the state unless the state's income and parents' educational levels rose accordingly, which was not the case. Instead, all of the changes in these variables – Connecticut wealth, race/ethnicity and parent education – would predict lower scores. Baron found that in 1998, Connecticut had lower median income, more persons above the poverty index and a higher percentage of black and Hispanic students than it had in 1992.

Equity in Achievement

In her research, Baron discovered that while students from low-income families earned a lower index score in the state's reading CMT, the Index Scores for low-income students increased on the reading tests from 1993 through 1998, and the large disparity in performance between these disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students closed somewhat. Other racial/ethnic data reported by Baron include:

Connecticut black, Hispanic and white students outperformed their national counterparts in 1992, 1994 and 1998. In 1998, Connecticut's white students out-performed their national counterparts 55% to 38%; Connecticut black students outperformed their national counterparts 13% to 9% and Connecticut's Hispanic students outperformed their national counterparts 17% to 12%.

Connecticut's black, Hispanic and white students made greater growth than their national counterparts between 1992 and 1998. The growth of Connecticut blacks was 4 percentage points compared to blacks nationally who improved 1 percentage point; the growth of Connecticut Hispanics was 9 percentage points compared to U.S. Hispanics whose performance decreased by 2 percentage points; and the growth of Connecticut whites was 13 percentage points compared to U.S. whites whose growth was 5 percentage points.

Connecticut's white students made greater progress from 1992 to 1998 (13 points) than their black (4 points) or Hispanic (9 points) counterparts on the percentages of students performing at or above proficiency with the corresponding gaps increasing.

"Therefore, the major sources of Connecticut's improvement in reading between 1992-1998 lie beyond its demographic characteristics," concludes Baron.

Promising Practices: State Policies and Practices

For *Exploring High and Improving Reading Achievement in Connecticut*, Baron used state test data to identify the 10 medium and large school districts in the state that made the most improvement in reading achievement. The author interviewed numerous educators and policymakers at the state level as well as officials from the 10 local school districts to identify state policies and local policies and practices that contributed to the high reading scores.

Baron describes six state policies and practices identified by officials from Connecticut's 10 top-performing districts as contributing most to local progress:

- The state test (CMT) objectives and specifications as a catalyst for district realignment of curriculum and instruction
- The state's reporting of CMT results in multiple and useful ways
- Tests made available to local districts at grades 3, 5 and 7 to supplement the CMTs at grades 4, 6 and 8
- School profiles publicly reported to local boards of education and audiences statewide
- State-level resources provided to Connecticut's neediest districts
- High teacher salaries and teacher standards enable districts' ability to attract and maintain high quality teachers.

During the interviews, Baron discovered a second set of policies that are much more recent, but that local officials "feel are currently serving to facilitate their efforts to improve the reading proficiency of their students, particularly in the state's neediest districts." While they are too recent to explain Connecticut's success and growth between 1992 and 1998, these policies "are likely to influence the current and future efforts of Connecticut's teachers to improve their reading instruction." They are:

State Board of Education Policies

- New 1999 guidelines for identifying students with learning disabilities
These guidelines are "likely to have an important impact," writes Baron because, according to Reid Lyon, "approximately 80 percent of students identified as having a learning disability have reading problems."

State Legislature Categorical Grants to State's Neediest Districts/Schools

- school readiness/preschool grants – in 1997, the Connecticut General Assembly adopted the School Readiness Act. During the first two years School Readiness Councils were appointed, needs were assessed and funding was provided for 4,000 to 5,000 School Readiness slots.
- early reading success grants – legislation establishes state grants to help the 14 largest and most economically and educationally needy school districts to improve the reading skills of younger students; reduce class size in early grades; and establish full-day kindergarten programs. The act also establishes grants to help priority districts buy books for school libraries and requires teachers to be trained in how to teach reading.



RESOURCES

American Federation of Teachers. (1998). *Building on the Best, Learning from What Works: Seven Promising Reading and English Language Arts Programs*. Washington, D.C. www.aft.org

Burns, Susan and Catherine, Snow. (1998) *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. National Academy of Science Press. Washington, D.C. www.nap.edu

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Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement. (1997) *Every Child A Reader*. University of Michigan. Ann Arbor, Michigan. www.ciera.org.

Connecticut State Department of Education. Box 2219. Hartford, Connecticut 06145. (860)566-5061. www.ct.us/sde

Learning First Alliance. (1998) *Every Child Reading: An Action Plan*. Washington, D.C. www.learningfirst.org.

International Reading Association. 800 Barksdale Road. P.O. Box 8139. Newark, Delaware 19714-0015. (302)731-1600. www.reading.org

NAEP 1998 Writing Report. (1998) National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C. (www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/, (877)4ED-Pubs)

- educational accountability and summer school grants – the act requires various measures to identify and help failing school and students.
- expansion of the number of family resource center grants – the legislation requires the state Department of Education and the Department of Social Services to coordinate a family resource center program to provide child care, remedial education, literacy services and supportive services. The family resource centers must be associated with public schools, recruit parents to participate, provide all-day child care; before-and-after-school care; and family training for expectant parents and parents with children under the age of three, among other things.

Governor's Initiatives

- Governor Rowland's Summer Reading Challenge – Governor John Rowland launched the Governor's Summer Reading Challenge in June 1996. He invited all of Connecticut's students in public and private schools to read as many books as possible during the summer months. In its third summer, nearly 129,000 students from almost 600 schools read more than 1.1 million books during the summer, an average of almost 9 books per student.

Baron commented that reading has become a common and bipartisan issue given that the sources of these policies include a wide group of people and organizations – the State Board of Education, the Legislature and the governor.

Promising Practices: Local Policies and Practices

Educators in the ten Connecticut school districts whose students had made the greatest improvement between 1992 and 1998 collectively identified two sets of factors composed of organizational and instructional policies and practices. These are:

Organizational Policies & Practices at the District & School Level

- active local school board support
- creating strong ownership and accountability mechanisms in every school
- linking teacher evaluation to student achievement
- providing professional development opportunities for



RESOURCES (cont'd)

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National Institute for Literacy. 1775
I Street NW. Suite 730. Washing-
ton, D.C. 20006. (202)233-2025.
www.nifl.gov (Andrew Hartman and
Sandra Baxter)

National Institute of Child Health
and Human Development. National
Institutes of Health. 6100 Executive
Boulevard, Room 4B05G.
Bethesda, Maryland 20892
(301)496-4000 (G. Reid Lyon)

National Writing Project.. 5511
Tolman Hall. #1670. University of
California-Berkeley. Berkeley,
California 94720-1670. (510)642-
0963. www.berkeley.edu

Rand Corporation. 1333 H Street
NW. Washington, D.C. 20005.
(202)296-5000. www.rand.org
(David Grissmer)

Read Across America. National
Education Association. 1201 16th
Street NW. Washington, D.C.
20036. (202)822-SEUSS.
www.nea.org/readacross.

administrators and teachers to learn the skills re-
quired to improve students' reading

- involving parents in the work of the schools
- continuous monitoring of student achievement
- increasing the amount of time available for reading instruction

Instructional Policies & Practices Used Inside the Classrooms

- teachers emphasize phonemic awareness in kinder-
garten and first grade.
- teachers use a wide variety of reading materials to
address different instructional needs within the
same classrooms.
- teachers and administrators describe their reading
program as "balanced" between word analysis skills
and comprehension strategies.
- teachers reinforce reading skills on a daily basis
through writing
- teachers use systematic spelling programs to help
teach and/or reinforce the regularities and irregulari-
ties of the English language
- teachers use on-going assessment of students'
reading proficiency
- teachers identify children with delayed reading
development early and provide intensive interven-
tions for them by the end of first grade
- teachers use a variety of intervention strategies and
experts to accelerate the development of delayed
readers.

Baron concludes "what characterizes the majority of the districts with the greatest improvement in reading scores was the collective ownership of reading instruction as a district priority." The more successful schools, she added, "functioned as well-organized systems, with each teacher using CMT feedback for his or her own students to make alterations in materials, strategies and curricular emphasis."

At the classroom level, Baron observed that instructional practices in the 10 school districts were eclectic. "Districts vary from each other on the pacing and details of their reading instruction," she added. Yet, she still noticed similarities in the districts that had made the most improvement. For example, all children were taught at the earliest level to hear and manipulate phonemes in words.



What is the National Education Goals Panel?

The National Education Goals Panel is a unique bipartisan body of state and federal officials created in 1990 by President Bush and the nation's Governors to report state and national progress and urge education improvement efforts to reach a set of National Education Goals.

Who serves on the National Education Goals Panel and how are they chosen?

Eight governors, four state legislators, four members of the U.S. Congress, and two members appointed by the President serve on the Goals Panel. Members are appointed by the leadership of the National Governors' Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the U.S. Senate and House, and the President.

What does the Goals Panel do?

The Goals Panel has been charged to:

- Report state and national progress toward the National Education Goals.
- Work to establish a system of high academic standards and assessments.
- Identify promising and effective reform strategies.
- Recommend actions for state, federal and local governments to take.
- Build a nationwide, bipartisan consensus to achieve the Goals.

The annual Goals Report and other publications of the Panel are available without charge upon request from the Goals Panel or at its web site www.negp.gov. Publications requests can be made by mail, fax, or e-mail, or Internet.

Connecticut's most successful schools use kindergarten screening instruments to identify which children need further assistance and which do not. Typically, regular classroom teachers work hand-in-hand with reading specialists and speech and language pathologists to "help diagnose students' reading difficulties and provide appropriate interventions," she writes.

Baron: "The challenge facing Connecticut at the present time is how to replicate the characteristics of effective classrooms described in this report in the rest of the state's schools – the elusive "scaling up" problem."

Recommendations

Baron concludes her report with a series of recommendations to "enable all students to read fluently and with enjoyment." Her suggestions are based on the policy lessons learned from interviews with state and local officials:

- Provide a clear set of literacy objectives for grades 1-3.
- Make available a set of instruments for assessing phonemic awareness and other key early literacy skills.
- Use the school profiles to collect and disseminate information about local schools' early literacy practices and their effectiveness.
- Change teacher certification requirements to reflect the research in early literacy.
- Work with the state's colleges and universities to create the necessary infrastructure to train new teachers and provide in-service for experienced teachers.
- At the district level, foster ownership and accountability in the district and schools.

Baron: "This report goes beyond saying, "Connecticut did something right." The current challenge is both to do what is right even better, and to be open to new approaches as they are tried



and researched. Reading well is a dynamic skill. So must be our approach to teaching this most fundamental of all learning skills.

News from the Goals Panel

On October 26, 1999, the Goals Panel released two new reports on reading: one called *Reading Achievement State by State 1999*; the other, *Exploring High and Improving Reading Achievement in Connecticut*, which is the case study described in this Monthly.

Connecticut Governor John Rowland, Connecticut Education Commissioner Ted Sergi and a fourth-grade class joined members of the press in discussing the report's findings at an elementary school in New Britain, Connecticut. New Britain is one of the 10 Connecticut local school districts that made the greatest gains in reading achievement. These reports are posted on the Panel's website (www.negp.gov) and are available free-of-charge from the Goals Panel.

Upcoming Goals Panel Events and Products

December 1, 1999: NEGP 10th Anniversary Celebration at the J.W. Marriot, Washington, D.C
1:00 p.m.: Conference on the Next Major Issues in Education Reform
5:30 p.m.: Reception, followed by Award Dinner

December 2, 1999: NEGP Meeting and Press Conference
9:30 a.m.: Goals Panel Meeting
11:00 a.m.: Press Conference on 1999 Goals Report

January 2000: Release of Promising Practices 1999

February 25, 2000: NEGP Teleconference on the use of Quality Principles in education

February 26, 2000: NEGP Meeting at the National Press Club